



Is Africa ready for democracy?

If democracy is necessary for a healthy economy, writes **SIKONATHI MANTSHANTSHA**, a growing and well-educated African middle class is vital for that democracy to thrive.

Is the African continent ready for Western-style democracy? Does Africa need Western-style democracy to grow? What about a unique, African-grown solution? Can Africa's inclusive traditional governance systems be modified to govern modern states? Are Africa's politicians prepared to work for the good of the continent? Do the people of Africa know what is good for the economic growth of their respective countries?

Looking at the African continent, one sees traces of political democracy and improving economies. Although not perfect, examples like Nigeria, where state power has changed hands peacefully in three successive elections, provide encouraging signs for democracy on the continent. Zambia has also had no fewer than four elections in which the will of the people has been respected. The same goes for Malawi. All three of these countries replaced their former strongmen (although they had to be nudged firmly from state house in the case of the latter two) in largely peaceful transitions

and went on also to replace their successors.

But there are also glaring examples of the old Africa, where oppressive colonial regimes have been replaced with equally oppressive – if not worse – dictatorial regimes.

While the likes of Botswana, South Africa, Mauritius, Tanzania and – recently – Mozambique have been shining examples of the renewal of the continent, Zimbabwe, Libya and Gabon (among others) persist in the old ways which have little tolerance for dissent.

Whereas the popular will in Zimbabwe has been all but ignored, the strongmen of Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Angola have been exercising sham elections in which only they are the contestants.

While Togo's president Gnassingbe Eyadema and Gabon's president Omar Bongo are Africa's longest-serving leaders with close on 70 years of (mis)rule between them, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, Equatorial Guinea's Theodore Nguema and Angola's Jose Eduardo dos Santos are not far behind. They each have been in power for no fewer than 25 years.

What can be done to help Africa attain real democracy that will hopefully lead to healthy and growing economies? Do healthy economies automatically lead to democracy? Or is the emphasis on Africa's lack of democracy unnecessarily exaggerated, with Asian capitalist-communist methods also feasible?

"Give Africa some credit for what has already been achieved," says Professor Nicholas Biekpe of the University of Stellenbosch Business School, who originates from Ghana. Biekpe, the USB's Development Finance and Econometrics professor, says there were many more (civil) wars on the African continent twenty years ago than there are today. He also points at the double standards applied by the West in calling for democracy in Africa, while it is happy with most countries in Asia and elsewhere not practising democracy.

"Some of the most successful states in Asia are not democracies. Other regions have their own systems and they don't need to practise Western-style democracy in order to succeed," says Biekpe. The examples he cites are China, Singapore, Dubai and Saudi Arabia, which all have different political systems.

He believes the solution to Africa's problems lies mainly in fostering an educated African population which classifies itself in terms of nationality rather than on tribal lines.

"Governments must play a role in bringing about good education to as many people as possible," says Biekpe. "It is not your ethnic or tribal background that will determine your future, but your national background." He says a situation in which a particular tribal group dominates politics for a long time must be avoided at all costs.

Biekpe is referring to the genocide that ripped Rwanda apart and the recent violence following disputed elections in Kenya where people voted, not for what was best for their country, but for their own tribes. "The best way going forward is an inclusive government of national unity (GNU), rather than the winner-takes-all approach of the West," says Biekpe. The GNU route is best where

a ruling party is voted out of power, but all African countries could benefit by practising an inclusive proportional representation system in parliament, because all groups are then accommodated proportionally to their numbers. "More emphasis must be put on educating people about their nationalism – to work for the country and not the tribe or ethnic group." One cannot have the ascendancy of one group at the total loss of the other.

'Give Africa some credit for what has already been achieved'

Economics and Management lecturer at the USB, Professor Wolfgang Thomas concurs with Biekpe: "We tend to interpret democracy very narrowly and expect what happens in the West also to happen here." Thomas says it is "totally unrealistic" to expect Africa to accept the West's winner-takes-all approach to democracy. He says in Africa, when a head of state is voted out of office, the winner-takes-all approach is catastrophic for the losing incumbent. "The loser loses all – social and economic status – usually with nothing to retire on, never having had the opportunity to make money."

This view is informed by the continent's history where today's rulers were yesterday's freedom fighters, whose only occupation provided them with no economic rewards.

Usually when African freedom fighters become rulers this is the first time they get an opportunity to make money. "It is relatively easy (for a voted-out president) in Europe, where leaders have pensions and were living middle-class lives before they attained power," says Thomas. "When they lose office, they simply go back to their former lives."

Is the solution then a bigger, educated middle class?

Thomas says the growing middle-class communities in Africa augur well for the future. "People must create wealth outside

the political arena and make money for themselves."

Professor André Roux, director of the Institute for Futures Research at the USB, agrees that education is the main tool to be used to strengthen democracy. "Decent education can contribute to liberalising Africa's political elites," says Roux.

But Zimbabwe is known to have produced the best education system in post-colonial Africa. What could have gone wrong? "If state institutions have no autonomy there won't be any democracy," answers Roux. "Voters must respect and trust those institutions for democracy to work." He says the rule of law must not be violated at will by the incumbent president. If voters know the legal system is independent of the executive, they will respect it and democracy will have a better chance. "Such institutions must be protected at all costs for democracy to work," says Roux.

Professor Roux says, however, that strong and autonomous institutions alone are never going to make democracy work. Roux echoes Professor Thomas's example about the middle class: "Democracy will be fragile if it is not underpinned by a fairly decently performing economy. The economy must improve for democracy to succeed." An improving and shared economy brings about larger numbers of people in the middle class. "The middle-income group has a vested interest in sustaining democracy," says Roux. "This income group will want democracy and nothing else."

That's because only democracy can enable the middle class to invest, knowing that its assets are protected by law and that everyone of them has a realistic chance of creating wealth and to be the best they can be.

For the African middle class to grow and thrive, Africa has to adopt the best that Western democracy and the strange Chinese mix of capitalism and communism have to offer – without necessarily totally disregarding the benefits of inclusive home-grown solutions that have evolved in countries like South Africa where the political settlement of 1994 catered for a transitional period of an inclusive GNU. □

From left:
Prof Biekpe, USB.
Prof Wolfgang Thomas, USB
Prof André Roux, Institute for Futures Research

